

## Facilitating 'Let's Talk' Conversations

### Why do it?

A good meeting not only gets work done, but also involves, supports and empowers the participants, creating a high level of energy and enthusiasm. A sense of community and connection to fellow group members is the basis for successful group work and social change. Good facilitation will help achieve all of this.

### What does the Facilitator Do?

A facilitator is essentially a helper for the group to have an efficient and inclusive meeting. Superficially a facilitator fills a role similar to that of the traditional chairperson. There are, however, important differences. A facilitator never "directs" the group without its consent. At no time does the facilitator make decisions for the group or take on functions which are the responsibility of the group as a whole. A good facilitator stays neutral and helps the members of the meeting to be aware that it is *their* business being conducted.

Depending on the group, a facilitator might:

- Help the group to decide on a structure and process for the meeting and to keep to it.
- Keep the meeting focused on one item at a time until decisions are reached.
- Regulate the flow of discussion – drawing out quiet people and limiting over-talking.
- Clarify and summarize points, test for consensus, and formalize decisions.
- Help the group in dealing with conflicts.

### Tools for Effective Facilitation

**Brainstorming** – A way of quickly gathering a large number of ideas. Start by stating the issue. Ask people to say whatever comes into their heads as fast as possible without censoring it. This encourages creativity and frees energy. Write down all ideas for later discussion.

**Go-rounds** – Everyone takes a turn to speak without interruption or comment from other people. Go-rounds help to gather opinions, feelings and ideas; as well as slow down the discussion and improve listening. Make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak.

**Talking Stick** – People may speak only when they hold the talking stick (or other nominated item). This makes people conscious of when they interrupt others.

**Small-group Discussion** – When the organization/group is large, it may be necessary to break out into smaller groups to discuss certain topics/ideas.



## Facilitating a Meeting - Beginning to End

### Preparing for the Meeting

- Review Let's Talk material; prepare an introduction/overview to the group.
- Decide what Facilitation Tools you may use.
- Plan in breaks, especially if the meeting will be longer than 1½ hours; plan in time for an end-of-meeting evaluation.
- Write the proposed agenda on a blackboard or flip chart, or give individual copies to everyone; ensure that copies of The Agreements are available for display.
- Ensure that everyone is informed about time, place and content of the meeting.
- Distribute pre-meeting materials if possible.
- Be aware of the physical arrangements such as temperature, air quality, and ability to hear and see; arrange the seating in an inclusive way.
- Find an alternative facilitator who can take over in case of emergency, or if the main facilitator tires or wants to participate more actively in discussion.

### Facilitating the Meeting

- Introduce yourself and give an overview of Let's Talk.
- Set the boundaries of the meeting: explain the time frame, subject, aims of meeting, responsibility of facilitator, and what you aim to do.
- Outline what behavior is acceptable/not acceptable in meeting (see The Agreements).
- Appoint other roles such as *recorder* (note-taker) and *timekeeper* (reminds facilitator of time/progress of meeting).
- Be firm if necessary. Allocate time for each item and set a realistic finishing time.
- Go through the agenda question by question. Keep the group focused on one item at a time until a decision has been reached, even if the decision is to shelve it for some other time.
- Use consensus decision-making (i.e., show of hands) to complete the Conversation Report's rating questions. Make allowance for extra time to go deeper into the issue if necessary.
- Invite and regulate discussion. Clarify proposals put forward.
- State and restate the position of the meeting as it appears to be emerging, until agreement is reached.
- Introduce tools such as *Brainstorming*, *Go-rounds*, *Talking Sticks*, or *Small-Group Discussions* to equalize participation and to create a safe atmosphere for expressing opinions and feelings.
- Regulate the flow of discussion by calling on speakers.
- Help everyone to participate – draw out quiet people, limit over-talking, don't let anyone dominate the discussion.
- Be positive: use affirmation and appreciation, and comment on special contributions of members and accomplishments of the group.
- Close meeting by thanking members for participation and explaining next steps, e.g., details of next meeting or completion of Conversation Report.

